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LOCATING SOUTH EASTERN BENGAL IN THE BUDDHIST NETWORK OF BAY OF BENGAL (C. 7TH CENTURY CE-13TH CENTURY CE)

Suchandra Ghosh

Southeastern Bengal comprised basically the kingdom of Samatata and Harikela in the early medieval period. Samatata and Harikela represent the present territories of Noakhali, Comilla and Chattagram in Bangladesh and Tripura in India. Its linkages with different regions of South East Asia are partially known from Hsuan Tsang's account when he talks of six areas, which were linked with Samatata. These are Shi-li-cha-ta-lo (Srikshetra in Myanmar), Kia-mo-land-kia (Kamalanka, identified with Pegu and the Irrawaddy delta in Myanmar), To-lo-po-ti (Dvaravati in present Thailand), I-shung-na-pu-lo (Ishanapura, to the east of Dvaravati), Mo-ho-chen-po (Mahachampa in Vietnam) and Yen-nio-na-chen (identification uncertain).[1] This linkage perhaps helped in the intrusion of Mahayana Buddhism in some areas of South East Asia. In the first half of the ninth century Srivijaya sent a mission to the Pala court in Bengal in a move to expand the Srivijayan network. Western Bengal did not have any port at that time so it must have been a port of Southeastern Bengal through which the network was to connect. Recent excavations of ship wrecks in the Java sea have revealed objects related to Mahayana Buddhism which could have specific links to Southeastern Bengal. Perhaps from the eighth century onwards bronzes from Southeastern Bengal were imported into Java. The region had definite connection with the Arakan region (presently a province of Myanmar) also. Tamralipta lost its importance and the port of Samandar in Southeastern Bengal succeeded it. Following the Arab accounts, Samandar seems to have maintained linkages with Serendib (Srilanka), Kanja (Kanchipuram in Tamilnadu or Ganjam in Orissa) and Uranshin (Orissa coast).[2] Ibn Battuta's voyages point to the connection between Sudkawan (Samandar?) and the Maldives. The paper attempts to explore new facets of the known maritime linkage of Southeastern Bengal from a detailed study of the shipwrecks and Buddhist ritual objects that circulated in the maritime network of Bay of Bengal.

It will be worthwhile to mention here that an early to mid-tenth century ship wreck in the Java sea, the Intan was excavated in 1997 by Michael Flecker and it has been found that its cargo included an assortment of metal moulds and ritual utensils associated with Mahayana Buddhism.[3] This shipwreck shows that a locally made vessel

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traded between Sumatra and Java, between the powerful empire of Srivijaya and the Javanese state of Mataram. She carried bronzes cast in Sumatra, yet showing the strong Buddhist and Brahmanical influences of India. According to Flecker, since Bengal, like Java, had no tin, seafarers could have previously transported tin from Kedah to Bengal, where local artisans made the icons, and then shipped these to Java.[4] The idea that tin was transported from Kedah has taken a back seat and recent archaeological excavations suggest that tin was more likely to have come from Bangka Island, which was a known region of the Srivijaya realm, and would have been a logical stopover on the eastern end of the Straits of Melaka passageway prior to a vessel's departure for Java.[5] In addition, the shipment included several moulds for local artisans to use to produce bronze and terracotta Buddhist miniature shrines. Dedication of miniature Buddha images in Buddhist shrines was a common feature in South Asia and perhaps was also adopted as a practice in Southeast Asia. The icons produced by these moulds appear in the Borobudur panel relief. These Buddhist icons according to Hall "were consistent with the international movement of Buddhist clerics and pilgrims in those times, as Buddhism had been embraced by Java's kings as a means to transcend ethnic loyalties and societal institutions".[6] Numerous artifacts discovered in the wreck were ritual objects associated with Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism: bells and a spear-shaped scepter. Instead of just Bengal we would like to specifically identify this region as Southeastern Bengal. We are aware of the very strong presence of Vajrayanism here. Three metal stupa moulds and moulds for the making of Bodhisattva votive tablets were also found. According to John Guy the moulds were perhaps imported from eastern India though these were not imitations of those found in Bodhgaya.[7] We feel that these *stupa* moulds probably bore the influence of the Jhewari bronze *stupa* which belonged to the 9th century CE. Jhewari is a village in Chittagong where a big hoard of bronze images was found.

A vibrant network of long distance as well as inter-regional trade helped in the dissemination of Buddhism in the period of our study. Thus it is not improbable that the art of making metal *stupas* were transported to regions of South-east Asia. This probably happened courtesy the movement of monks and artisans in this period. Patronage by the rulers of the period helped in the consolidation of Buddhism in the region which led to the donation of finest Jewari bronzes. In support of this argument attention may be drawn to a catalogue of ancient Indonesian bronzes by Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer. According to her Indo-Javanese bronzes did not originate from Nalanda or any other centers of Bihar as it was earlier believed. They originated from Comilla

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and Chittagong districts in Bangladesh.[8] According to her these areas were easily accessible to ships coming from Southeast Asian countries. She feels that Javanese bronzes had stronger similarities with sculptural schools of Comilla and Chittagong, which belonged to the Pala schools of sculpture but had its own different regional idiom. Thus from the eighth century onwards bronzes from Southeastern Bengal were imported into Java. At first the Javanese bronze masters copied them but within a short space of time the indigenous Javanese element predominated. The bronze items in the ship wreck bear testimony to this. The types of religious artifacts found on the Intan wreck are even more conspicuous in quantity on another major tenth-century shipwreck, recovered sixty miles (100 kilometers) off the Java north coast from Cirebon. The Cirebon wreck carried cargo similar to that found on the Intan vessel, with the exception that it had significantly more bronze religious artifacts, intended for temple worship, and Buddhist votive tablets, for wider public consumption, all of which are thought to have been produced in an unknown Sumatra production center for export to Java.[9] Is it possible to think that some of these were produced in the Harikela (Chittagong) region which could boast of a workshop of metal objects? Such shipments like the one located at Intan could also be sent to Harikela from the region of Tambralinga and its environs and vice versa as both belonged to the Bay of Bengal maritime network.

Thus though Bengal did not produce tin we have profusion of bronze sculptures. For this it had to establish links, directly or indirectly with tin producing areas. As tin was a trading commodity along trans Asiatic routes, it is possible that Southeastern Bengal received its share of tin from the Isthmian tract. Within the upper part of the Thai-Malay peninsula, the richest tin deposits are located near Ranong on the west coast and in areas around Nakhon Si Thammarat on the east coast.[10] We have evidence of Southeastern Bengal's linkages with Peninsular Thailand through the study of sealings or votive tablets of both the regions.

K.R. Hall demonstrated that from the tenth century three new centers of international Buddhism emerged. India's Bihar-Bengal region, with Tibet and Central Asian connections, was the initial center in the evolution of Tantric Buddhism, under the patronage of the Pala rulers of northeast India. Simultaneously Sri Lanka became the centre of a revitalized Theravada Buddhism and China emerged as the new center of Buddhism's Mahayana sects.[11] Each of these new Buddhist schools was centered in a strategically important region of the international trade. To this we would like to add Southeastern Bengal, particularly the Samatata and Harikela region which had a long history of the presence and practice of Mahayana Buddhism. Mainamati in

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Comilla was home to many Buddhist monasteries where a large number of bronze sculptures from around 7th/8th centuries have been found. The bronzes depict deities belonging to Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism with its large and complex pantheon. The images indicate the transformation of the popular religion from Mahayana to Tantric and ultimately to polytheistic forms in which Buddhism became inextricably mixed with Brahmanical and aboriginal elements. The Mainamati bronzes mostly represent the Tantric Buddhist pantheon: the Dhyani Buddhas and their emanations, the Bodhisattvas Padmapani and Manjusri and the Bodhisaktis Tara and Chunda. Of the Dhyani Buddhas, the more popular deities were Akshobhya and Amitabha.[12] Moreover the discovery of Jhewari bronzes in Harikela datable to around 9th century CE attests to the affluence of a Buddhist establishment near Chittagong. Donation of metal images naturally implies that there was a local centre of production of such images and the clientele was wealthy enough to donate such images. Apart from the images we have donation of a miniature temple and a miniature *stupa*, belonging to 9th century CE also from Jhewari. Donation of minature stupas acquired for the donor the highest religious merit. This we learn from Hsuan Tsang when he explains the spiritual importance of these miniature *stupas*.[13] The affluence of a Buddhist establishment at or near the present Chittagong town for at least three centuries from the ninth to the end of the eleventh was important enough to draw pilgrims from other places. Interestingly the Intan ship wreck also had *stupa* moulds in its cargo. Similarity between a miniature stupa from Salban *Vihara* in Mainamati and Khuhaphimuk cave, Yala is striking. Both Samatata and Harikela were also strategically located and could be linked to maritime networks.

In the period following the Guptas, among the Buddhist ritual objects, one has to give priority to sealings or votive tablets which formed a significant aspect of Buddhist interactions across Asia. Among the Buddhist deities Avalokitesvara and Tara are common to both Southeastern Bangladesh and Peninsular Thailand and were integral to maritime life. Avalokitesvara's visualization as the protector of the mariners played an important role given the fact that most of the representation of Avalokitesvara was from coastal areas of peninsular Thailand. We have the famous anecdote of Fah-sien where he narrates how Avalokitesìvara, emerged as a rescuer when his ship was in the midst of deep peril and an impending shipwreck on his way back from Srilanka to China.[14] Thus apart from the monks, lay devotes like traders prayed to him while braving the sea. Osmund Bopearachchi has shown that in the Srilankan tradition he was regarded as protector in case of sea voyages.[15] Like Avalokitesvara, goddess Tara is among the

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favourites with regard to votive tablets in South Asia. Her presence in the coast can be related to the *ashtamahabhaya* aspect of Tara. In the peninsula we have small bronze sculptures of Tara. We know that Tara's character was defined largely by 7th century CE, she appeared in her enduring role as liberator from the eight great fears: lions, elephants, fire, snakes, thieves, drowning, captivity and evil spirits.[16] The iconography of Ashtamahabhaya Tara could be seen represented at Ratnagiri in Orissa which could be dated to late 8th or 9th century CE. The lowermost left panel shows a wave tossed boat and people appealing in desperation to Tara. Another iconographic conception of Ashtamahabhaya Tara is green and has eight arms, corresponding to the number of perils from which she offers rescue. A bronze image of green Tara has been discovered from Sathing Phra district datable to *c.* 9th century CE. In votive tablets (provenance not known) from eastern India we have the depiction of Syama Tara sitting in a relaxed posture atop a double lotus pedestal. Her left hand holds the stem of a blue lotus that rises to her left and identifies her as Syama Tara. A *stupa* appears above her right arm. An inscription, probably the Buddhist consecratory formula is stamped around the edge of the design.[17] One cannot but appreciate the beauty of this piece. It is comparable with the female type epitomized in early Pala art. The overlapping folded rim is very interesting. It appears from the description of *Manjusrimulakalpa* that the regions where Tara was venerated were close to the sea or river and the text particularly mentions Harikela and Kamarupa as two areas where Tara was venerated.[18] Ratnagiri in Orissa where we have a large image of Tara with *astamahabhaya* aspect was also not far from the sea.

With this brief overview an attempt has been made to locate convincingly Southeastern Bengal in the Buddhist network of Bay of Bengal.[19] It may be said that artefacts recovered from shipwrecks are now providing us with various categories of evidence of trading along the Maritime Silk road. Interesting categories of Buddhist ritual objects are votive tablets and miniature bronze *stupas* and images. All these ritual objects are significantly present in the region under discussion. The strategic location of Samatata and Harikela with its linkage through land with the Buddhist centre of Nalanda on one hand and its maritime linkage with centres of Buddhism in Peninsular Thailand and Java on the other should not be lost sight of. Thus Southeastern Bengal should be considered as a fourth centre of international Buddhism along with Bihar-Bengal, Srilanka and China.

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